Chapter 3

"Is It the End, My Friend?" Black Sabbath's Apocalypse of Horror

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The story is as legendary as it is serendipitous. In late 1960s Birmingham, England, a young heavy blues band named Earth settled into their new rehearsal space at the Newtown Community Centre. Convinced they needed to change their name because another band in the area also had the name Earth, they felt some urgency. Across the street was a movie theater that often played horror films, and on this particular day the cinema was playing Boris Karloff's movie *Black Sabbath*. The quartet looked on and marveled that people paid money to be frightened. Duly inspired, they named themselves Black Sabbath, down-tuned the guitar, and invoked the evil mystery of the tritone. Then on Friday the 13th, February 1970, they released their eponymous debut album, *Black Sabbath*, and heavy metal was born.

At a time when occult books by Dennis Wheatley topped bestseller lists, satanic-themed movies like *Rosemary's Baby* crushed the box office, and the Manson family murders overtook the news, a sludge-like sound thick with bass and heavy on guitar stormed both sides of the Atlantic. Soon, wearing large silver crosses to fend off a curse placed on them by an occult sect after they declined to play at Stonehenge, the lads from Birmingham brought the new reality of metal down upon youth culture.[1] Creating a lyrical cosmology that

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was mythic in quality, Black Sabbath recounted basic human struggles in a vast universe where forces of good and evil tear at humanity.

Birmingham Apocalypse

John "Ozzy" Osbourne, Tony Iommi, Bill Ward, and Terry "Geezer" Butler grew up in Birmingham, a blue-collar, working-class city with a bad economy and few options outside of the factories in the 1960s. They described their location—"the industrial slums of Birmingham"—succinctly as "grimy."[2] Both Iommi and Osbourne recall playing as children in the remains of buildings that had been bombed in World War II, ruined structures that also served as magnets for violent youth gangs.[3] Thus, metal was born in the apocalyptic and devilish mood of the late 1960s and early 1970s as a transgressive voice for working-class masculine disquiet. According to Iommi, Black Sabbath existed in the post-1960s hippy liberalism, posturing against the failure of "flowers in your hair" singsong bourgeois utopianism. Ozzy put it best in describing his reaction to the song "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)": "with everyone knackered, broke and dying from asbestos poisoning or whatever toxic shit they were breathing in every day . . . you'd hear all this hippy crap about 'gentle people' going to love-ins at Haight-Ashbury. . . . I hated those hippy-dippy songs, man."[4]

With down-tuned guitars and heavy reliance on the tritone, Black Sabbath brought a new musical sound to their audience. And they also explored a dark lyrical terrain, untouched by hippy bands. While at times their songs concerned social issues such as war and drug abuse, they more often took up dark dystopic themes and employed apocalyptic and occultist imagery.

In sum, theirs was an eschatological imagination. As members of an alienated and impoverished working class who had walked through the rubble of bombed out Birmingham on their way to school and work, Sabbath responded to the liberal 1960s middle-class counter-culture by creating sinister sounds. Their scary songs and rebellious postures were ultimately uplifting, though. As Bill Ward says, "All our songs have been about positive energy."[5] From the confluence of fright and uplift came the power of Black Sabbath.

Last Things

Iommi was raised in a nominally Catholic home; Osbourne attended Church of England Sunday School for a time; and chief lyricist Butler came from an Irish-Catholic family. So the members of Sabbath were no strangers to Christianity. In fact, according to Iommi, Butler was quite devoted to his Catholicism while maintaining an ardent interest in the fantasy fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien and the occultism of Dennis Wheatley. Ozzy even adds Aleister Crowley to this lyrical list. It was perhaps this strange blend of Christian and satanic influences that led to the band's apocalyptic and eschatological lyrics.[6]

Eschatology is the branch of Christian theology and philosophy concerned with "last things." The most famous example of Christian eschatology is the final book of the New Testament, the Book of the Revelation of Saint John the Divine (hereafter, Revelation). The imagery, metaphors, and literary devices of Revelation are numerous and well known. They include the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Beast and its mark of 666, the Antichrist, the Whore of Babylon, the Battle of Armageddon, and the Final Judgment. As a genre, apocalyptic literature in the ancient world was written for societies in collapse and communities suffering persecution. Christian eschatology, as found in Revelation, has its roots in Jewish apocalypticism especially as found in the Book of Daniel from the Hebrew Scriptures.[7]

The purpose of eschatological thought and apocalyptic writing was to exhort the suffering community to persevere. In the Christian version, although the oppressive structures of the Roman Empire were seemingly all powerful, ultimately history was in the hand of God. The promise was that, come the end of days, the faithful would live in paradise while the demonic structures of political, economic, and religious oppression would be cast away. There are many tropes in apocalyptic literature, for example, cosmic journeys in time and space, talking animals, great monsters, and otherworldly voices and visions.[8] Not surprisingly, several of these literary devices are found in the songs of Black Sabbath. The biblical scholar Elaine Pagels describes apocalyptic literature as a form of "war literature." Naturally the author of Revelation, St John of Patmos, wrote in the context of war and persecution in his own life. But the world of the 1960s and 1970s was also one of war and dystopic rumblings. The West was embroiled

in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the threat of a nuclear holocaust loomed large. Beyond that, the United States and some of its allies were involved in a hot war against communist forces in Vietnam. In this context, even if not intentionally, Black Sabbath was writing war music and poetry with the force of apocalyptic literary style.

Ancient apocalyptic iconography and its literary influence have a "multivalent" quality. This means that although apocalyptic literature refers to specific contexts for specific audiences, people across times and cultures can read their own realities into the literature. Thus, people in different centuries and countries have seen their own world in the text of Revelation. Black Sabbath, in fact, uses the rhetorical devices of Revelation to comment upon the despair of their own world, and this is in keeping with the multivalent possibilities of apocalyptic style.[9]

Satan Smiling: War and Judgment

The first song by Black Sabbath, "Black Sabbath," on the album, *Black Sabbath* begins with the sounds of falling rain and a tolling bell before we hear the anxious protagonist: "What is this that stands before me? / Figure in black which points at me / Turn around quick, and start to run." Black Sabbath dropped the gauntlet by asking a very basic question: What am I looking at? Over the next decade they described what they saw: political hypocrisy, nuclear dread, drug-fueled licentiousness, and legal difficulties. Threaded through the catalog of their tales is an apocalyptic reading of their world. The debut song ends with an eschatological vision clearly stated: "Is it the end, my friend? / Satan's coming 'round the bend / People running 'cause they're scared." Peeling away the patina of peace and love that was the flower-power 1960s, the eponymous song "recount[s] the crisis of judgment."[10]

Satan is a recurring figure in the early Black Sabbath offerings. While in apocalyptic literature generally, Satan is not necessarily an image of endings, for Black Sabbath the evil one is often invoked for that purpose. In "Black Sabbath" he is sitting and smiling, telling the afflicted their desires. In "N.I.B." we get a sly tale of the devil. Though it seems to be a hard-rock love song, we learn eventually that this

possessive missive from lover to beloved comes from the hand of Lucifer. And, alas, the beloved will not know until it is too late: only when one looks into Lucifer's eyes will all be revealed.

Of course, Black Sabbath were not the first artists to portray the power of erotic love as demonic or apocalyptic. Indeed, this portrayal has been a mainstay in art, reaching back to ancient mythology and biblical tales. "Warning" from the first album returns us to this theme, with the narrator describing the power a woman has over him as akin to such apocalyptic tropes as the sun changing shape, powerful winds, and changes in the sea. Perhaps wisely, he interprets these as a "sign" that he should have left her alone. The impact of his broken heart is global: "Now the whole wide world is movin'."

The apocalyptic use of Satan continues through some of Sabbath's war songs. In "War Pigs," an anti-Vietnam War song, we hear, "Hand of God has struck the hour / Day of Judgment, God is calling / On their knees the war pigs crawling / Begging mercy for their sins / Satan, laughing, spreads his wings." The working title of the song was "Walpurgis," which is significant, considering Geezer's interest in Crowleian occultism and considering that the twentieth chapter of Crowley's book *Moonchild* is titled "Walpurgis-Night."[11] In reality Walpurgis Night is a spring festival six months from All Hallows Eve, observed April 30–May 1. Though the festival has some roots in Christian folklore regarding an early Christian missionary to Germanic peoples, it is also the night when witches gather to welcome spring. Over time, it became a festival welcoming spring, to chase away evil spirits and ensure the fertility of land and cattle.[12] In Crowley's novel, on Walpurgis Night there is a metaphysical journey into darkness where a vision is received. In the vision worshipers at the Sabbath by Stonehenge give up their newborn babies to their respective gods, which are all assembled (and all the gods of history are present), who in turn throw the babies onto a giant web covered in insects, animals, and reptiles.[13]

Thus when a winged Satan emerges at the end of "War Pigs," laughing at all that has transpired—destruction and the dawning of God's judgment—Black Sabbath uses an ancient literary device to make real the evil nature of the monster of death. As Pagels describes this use of the monster, "while we think of dragons as creatures of folktales and children's stories, Israel's writers conjured them as images of the forces of disintegration and death that lurk in the background of our

world and threaten its stability."[14] For Sabbath, the stability of the world is manifest through Satan's minions: generals and politicians as war pigs. Their judgment is coming, invoking the biblical Last Judgment, and their pathetic state is brought into relief as Satan flies away in a cackle of laughter.

For Black Sabbath, that leering dark background would be made clear again. While Vietnam brought massive destruction, napalm, and drug-addled escapism ("Hand of Doom"), a greater beast, nuclear war, was looming on the horizon. Atomic Armageddon seemed imminent, and Black Sabbath brought to the poetic battlefield searing images in which: "Plastic flowers melt in sun / Fading moon falls . . . / Rivers turn to mud / Eyes melt into blood / . . . / Supernatural king / Takes earth under his wing / Heaven's golden chorus sings / Hell's angels flap their wings / Evil souls fall to Hell / Ever trapped in burning cell" ("Electric Funeral"). With apocalyptic imagination and extreme images, Black Sabbath articulated in lyrical form a real eschatological vision of the precarious nature of their world.

Sabbath Bloody Sabbath: Death and Deliverance

Though it reveals horrors, apocalyptic literature often brings hope for deliverance. For example, Sabbath's song "Iron Man" explores the theme of saviors and destroyers: "He was turned to steel / In the great magnetic field / When he traveled time / For the future of mankind / Nobody wants him /. . . / Planning his vengeance / . . . / Kills the people he once saved." Iron Man, plotting revenge from the realm of the dead by song's end, is resurrected and "lives again." In a transvaluation of the Christian apocalyptic narrative, "Iron Man" transforms the New Testament image of the loving Savior into an anti-hero.

In Christian eschatology, the deliverance is typically deliverance from the sins and evils of the world and even from death itself. Given the Christian and Satanic influence on Black Sabbath, we shouldn't be surprised to find that in addition to the anti-hero of "Iron Man" they also give us the rebellious Christian narrator of "After Forever." Reflecting on the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the dead, fear of death, and the reality of God, the narrator intones that such contemplation led to his conversion experience. A similar invocation is made on *Technical Ecstasy* in the song, "You Won't Change Me,"

with the plaintive cry: "If there's a God up there, well I hope he helps me / I need him now to set me free." In fact, this acceptance of the Christian God, made explicit with reference to those "that crucified Christ" in "After Forever," is identified as the ultimate countercultural expression: "Is your mind so small that you have to fall / In with the pack wherever they run?" The reality expressed in the song is deeply personal and is less concerned with the kind of social critique we get in "War Pigs."

Mixed in with the decaying delights of drug use and erotic longing is a fuller conception of the world Sabbath is negotiating: it is geopolitical and it is personal. Thus, while God may very well bring judgment upon those deceived by Satan, as in "War Pigs," God is also the primary actor of salvation, "The only one who can save you now from all this sin and hate." Whereas the sin and hate referenced in "After Forever" is personal, in "Children of the Grave" Black Sabbath makes the connection to larger forces of social justice and protest in the inherently apocalyptic milieu of possible atomic war.[15]

In "Lord of this World" the Christian theology of "After Forever" is reiterated. Creation of the world is ascribed to God, "someone above," our free will is affirmed, "you choose evil ways instead of love," and it is implied that the Lord of this World is Satan, the "evil possessor." Still, we should not confuse Black Sabbath's lyrical explorations with actual Christian conversion or evangelical triumph. Their depiction of the apocalyptic in the world around them is intensely personal to the point of resenting religious people in their midst: "Well I don't want no Jesus freak to tell me what it's all about / No black magician telling me to cast my soul out" ("Under the Sun/Every Day Comes and Goes").[16]

Sabbath's fifth album, *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, had cover art, titled *The Rape of Christ*, depicting a satanic orgy on a bed festooned with a skull, 666, and red claws.[17] It's not surprising, then, that "A National Acrobat" from *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* a features a reflection on the apparent randomness of existence. In contrast with images of being chosen in "Black Sabbath" and later on "Shock Wave," "A National Acrobat" highlights the seemingly arbitrary nature of one's birth. Still, reflection on the many never born from unsuccessful sperm, does not lead to melancholy. Rather, the narrator urges us to live life to the fullest: "Treat your life for what it's worth / And live for every breath." We are told that secrets will remain secret but also that the mystery

will be revealed to us at the time of our death—that we have many lives yet to live and that "love is life / And hate is living death." Yet, not all is happy in Black Sabbath's universe. Alienation and revenge form the story of the title track, "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath," where the power of isolation calls out to see "The people who have crippled you / You want to see them burn." Here "the gates of life have closed" and one hopes for "the hand of doom" to take one's mind away. Whereas Revelation and traditional eschatology is about hope for the oppressed and punishment for the oppressors, Black Sabbath locates that simple binary in a complicated present. Within a lyrical corpus that is unabashed in its contradictions—accepting and rejecting Christianity, reflecting on life through optimistic and dreadful lenses—Black Sabbath holds out for the liberation of the apocalyptic vision, through critique of society and embrace of individualism.

Planet Caravan: Journeys of Time and Space

A journey, often through time and space, is another significant literary device in apocalyptic literature. As St John "ascended . . . into the heavens," Black Sabbath employs cosmic travel.[18] Black Sabbath's first foray into cosmic travel comes via "Planet Caravan" on *Paranoid*. In a depiction of travel "through endless skies," the traveler describes the journey where celestial and terrestrial bodies are given qualities of life more typical of sentient beings: stars as eyes, a night that sighs, a moon with tears, and finally passing Mars not only as the red planet, but the god of war watching with his "crimson eye."

"Into the Void" from *Master of Reality* depicts space travel as an alternative to living in a world ruled by Satan: "Could it be the end of man and time /. . . / Leave the earth to all its sin and hate / Find another world where freedom waits /. . . / Leave the earth to Satan and his slaves / . . . / Make a home where love is there to stay." On the next album, *Vol. 4*, the song "Supernaut" also describes cosmic travel, speeding through the sky "to touch the sun." But this time the cosmic travel is radical in its individualism: "Got no religion / Don't need no friends . . . I've seen the future / And I've left it behind." Significantly, Sabbath returns to the theme of cosmic travel on *Sabotage* with the song "Hole in the Sky." This time the destination is heaven itself: "gateway to heaven / Window in time / Through it I fly / I've seen the

stars that disappear in the sun / . . . / And even though I'm sitting waiting for Mars / I don't believe there's any future . . . / . . . / I've watched the dogs of war enjoying their feast / I've seen the western world go down in the east / The food of love became the greed of our time." In these cosmic travelogues, as in biblical apocalyptic, the trauma of a fading existence on earth is replaced by the hope of the larger force of love.

The End Is Near

Black Sabbath presents a sacralized universe. If Christian apocalyptic hope failed, the new post-industrial metal messiah would not. Thus, in protesting their own sense of marginality, Black Sabbath produced an imaginative cosmology. Their songs reconstruct Christian images, in particular those of the apocalypse, which, in the industrial working-class context they came from, had failed to articulate a teleological vision congruent with the contradictions of modern post-war life.

Ultimately, the first incarnation of Black Sabbath came full circle. On the eve of Ozzy's firing from the band, the ironically titled album *Never Say Die!* was released. Their first song, "Black Sabbath," spoke of the demonic calling of "the chosen one," and on "Shock Wave" from *Never Say Die!*, we return to the "chosen one." Despite the efficacy of love, occasional calls to God, and the embrace of life-giving occultist imagery, this remains a fatalistic universe: "There's no reason for you to run / You can't escape the fate of the chosen one." In imitation of biblical apocalyptic, Black Sabbath invokes images of red skies and rising moons as signs of the end. The chosen one will not only die, but now realizes it, as he is caught in time itself between worlds buffeted by wind, mist, cold, dulled senses, and evil forces. Despite the myriad of worlds, lives, calls to God, and visions of Satan, in the end the reality of death does not negate that we are chosen.

Thus, as young men recalling the seer on Patmos two millennia ago, Black Sabbath in their early albums wrapped together hope and fear, dream and nightmare to present what is seemingly a counter-intuitive view of the cosmos; or, if not counter-intuitive, a rewriting of a more ancient understanding of the dualism of the divine. As Ward describes it: "Sometimes we've felt that God could be Satan . . . God is neither good nor evil. There's some of the Devil, or Abraxas, in God. . . .

If he was supposed to be only good, we couldn't believe him."[19] Black Sabbath embraced the incongruities of life and religious faith to speak through images redolent of Christian apocalyptic hope for the marginalized. And while they were a commercial success, they were also a social flash point, upsetting Christians and Satanists alike.[20] In the end, Sabbath's songs, like all good apocalyptic art, offer a vision that transcends their time and place and disturbs the powers that be.[21]

Notes

1. Tony Iommi with T.J. Lammers, *Iron Man: My Journey Through Heaven and Hell with Black Sabbath* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, Press, 2011), 53–54, 56–57, 61, 67; Ian Christe, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (New York: itbooks, 2003), 4; Ozzy Osbourne with Chris Ayres, *I Am Ozzy* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009), 82–83, 91, 96; and Robin Sylvan, *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 156–157.
2. Black Sabbath, *Paranoid*, Liner Notes (Vertigo, Warner Bros., 1970), 2; Black Sabbath, *Greatest Hits 1970–1978* (Rhino, Warner Bros., 2006), 3; and W. Scott Poole, *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 176.
3. Martin Popoff, *Black Sabbath: Doom Let Loose* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006), 2–4; Martin Popoff, *Black Sabbath FAQ: All That's Left to Know on the First Name in Metal* (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2011), 87–88; Helen Farley, "Demons, Devils and Witches: The Occult in Heavy Metal Music," in Gerd Bayer, ed., *Heavy Metal Music in Britain* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 73–88. Iommi, 10–11; Osbourne, 5, 12–13; and Christe, 1.
4. "Black Sabbath: The Last Supper," dir. Jeb Brien and Monica Hardiman (Epic Music Video, 1999); Iommi, 82; Osbourne, 46–47; Popoff, *Black Sabbath FAQ*, 31.
5. Mike Stark, *Black Sabbath: An Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 7, 9.
6. Iommi, 2, 81–82; Osbourne, 6; Christe, 9; Farley, 92–93; Nick Ravo, "AT TEA WITH: Ozzy Osbourne; Family Man. Fights Fat, Is Good With Kids," *The New York Times*, 23 September 1992, www.nytimes.com/1992/09/23/garden/at-tea-with-ozzy-osbourne-family-man-fights-fat-is-good-with-kids.html?pagewanted=all; and Popoff, *Black Sabbath: Doom Let Loose*, 7–8, 21, 60. Though Osbourne's upbringing included a nominally Catholic mother, his religious education came from the Church of England, Christe, 9.

7. Carl E. Braaten, "The Recovery of Apocalyptic Imagination," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 16–17.
8. Braaten, 26–29; and Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), Chapter 1.
9. Pagels, 34.
10. Christe, 2.
11. Iommi, 73; Christe, 9; Osbourne, 110; and Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild: A Prologue* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1970), 277–291.
12. Gerttrude Casanova, 'St. Walburga,' *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), www.newadvent.org/cathen/15526b.htm (accessed 13 March 2012); and Ruth Edna Kelly, *The Book of Hallowe'en* (1919) (Charleston: Forgotten Books, 2012), 91–95, www.forgottenbooks.org/info/9781605069494.
13. Crowley, 280–282.
14. Pagels, 26.
15. This conception is not unlike that of Bono's eschatology articulated in U2's songs. Though there could be almost no more different bands to compare on this front, this mixture of sexuality, geopolitics, and personal suffering and salvation are similar. See, "Comic Endings: Spirit and Flesh in Bono's Apocalyptic Imagination, 1980–1983," in Michael J. Gilmour, ed., *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 61–78.
16. Consider also "Thrill of it All" from *Sabotage*.
17. Popoff, *Black Sabbath: Doom Let Loose*, 88.
18. Pagels, 17.
19. Popoff, *Black Sabbath: Doom Let Loose*, 24.
20. Pagels, 171, 177; and Popoff, *Black Sabbath: Doom Let Loose*, 24, 59–60.
21. Thanks to Michael Gilmour and Joseph Bongiorno for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter and the Centre for Studies in Religion & Society at the University of Victoria for its support.